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The Oakland Tribune

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★ CITY EDITOR

creative new jazz

■ Eddie Moore Jazz Festival begins tonight

CUE



MONDAY

JULY 31, 1995

Haas school of business grads — out on their own
BUSINESS DAY

Partly cloudy
High 77
Low 58
Map, A-2



Standby guys

■ Backup QBs for Raiders, Niners just an injury away

SPORTS DAY



Neighborhood's bit of gold turns out to be lead-filled

By Cecily Burt and Tyler Cunningham
STAFF WRITERS

OAKLAND — Al Logan would finish his nightly maintenance shift at Electric Auto-Lite Company just as the sun began to rise behind the plant's 100-foot smoke stack.

He would wade through gray clouds of powdered lead oxide drifting through the open room, peel off his protective rubber gloves, remove his respirator mask and step into the shower, scrubbing furiously to remove every trace of lead from his body. It was a routine he performed every workday for 30 years.

"I was always careful," he recalled in a recent interview. "I

didn't want to bring that stuff home to my kids."

Logan's children turned out to be a lot luckier than those who lived in the modest homes surrounding the former battery factory, a site the city turned into Verdese Carter Park.

For 17 years, Carter Park stood out as a green gem in the middle of an Elmhurst district neighborhood too liberally slathered in concrete. With a day care center, recreation building, basketball courts and a huge, curving sandbox filled with slides, swings and giant turtles, the park seemed like a dream come true for the community.

But dangerous amounts of lead

Please see **Lead**, A-7



RAY CHAVEZ — Staff

Ike Williams, back row, has been concerned for years about his family's health problems and their possible link to lead found in the soil around Verdese Carter Park. Williams holds granddaughter Jamikka Watkins, 4, who, tests show, had high levels of lead in her blood. Grandson James Watkins, 5, suffered from high fevers and rashes.

The city of Oakland acquired the former battery factory and greenhouse properties in 1975. Between 1976 and 1978, approximately 5700 cubic yards of lead-contaminated soils were removed for construction of the park. In 1993, the city of Oakland removed approximately 17,000 cubic yards of soil from the park after new testing showed elevated levels of lead and arsenic were present in soils.

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Lead: Park has history of environmental woes

Continued from A-1

and other chemicals were barely covered by the park's sod and blacktop. The park wasn't even finished in 1977 when a test found levels of lead in the soil hundreds of times higher than health standards allow. The city's solution — removing 12 inches of topsoil — never truly solved the problem.

In 1993, more tests found neighborhood children with twice the safe level of lead in their bloodstreams. When a consultant's study found enough contaminants in the soil to make his hands tingle, the city shelved the report.

Officials say it's over

Now local and federal officials say they have put an end to the park's history of neglect and half-hearted solutions.

They say they will screen children for lead poisoning and help neighbors clean the lead from their own back yards. Officials say they've finally removed all the contaminated soil from the park and it should reopen by November.

But the park's mostly African-American neighbors say the story is a classic example of environmental racism and they still wonder whether their neighborhood is truly safe.

And one county official warns that the errors of Verdesse Carter Park may be repeated across the street at Cox Elementary School, where lead was recently found in the soil.

"I don't feel confident that this is the end, just because of the way the whole thing happened," said Michael Carter, 40, who lives on 96th Avenue. "Right now they're filling it in, and everything is going to be all right, they say. But I won't be going over there."

Monthly blood tests, the occasional puddle of acid and the ever-present threat of lead poisoning were all considered part of earning a paycheck on the assembly line.

"No one could call a battery factory a desirable place of work," said Tony Roach, one-time plant manager. "It was nasty."

The plant's danger struck home for Roach in 1949 when his brother Manuel, a welder and inspector there, was diagnosed with lead poisoning.

"He would wake up in the middle of the night shaking," said Roach, who lived with his brother during his sickness. "The only thing that would stop it was a bath in ice-cold water."

Lead blocks calcium

Breathing or eating lead blocks the absorption of calcium and can lead to permanent brain damage, learning disabilities, behavioral problems, kidney damage and hearing loss.

The fits drove Manuel to quit Auto-Lite. His shaking gradually disappeared after he found work at a smaller, better ventilated battery factory, his brother said.

The state's Occupational Safety and Health Administration worked to improve working conditions at the factory. But while OSHA crusaded to protect employees from the lead, there was no similar agency in place to monitor the amount of lead thrown into the air by the plant's giant smoke stack. Elmhurst citizens remained unaware as lead silently seeped into the community.

"I have no doubt some lead came out of that stack," said Michael Bollet, an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) project manager. Recent soil tests revealing high lead levels in Elmhurst yards confirm his suspicion.

Roach claims it was common knowledge that lead escaped from the plant's stack. "Everyone knew it was dangerous," he said. "That whole neighborhood had to be contaminated."

Plant closed in 1973

In 1973, after more than 50 years of operation, Electric Auto-Lite built its last battery.

Elsie Smith cheered in 1975 when Oakland officials bought the old battery factory that ate up the blocks between Sunnyside Street and Bancroft Avenue and 98th and 96th avenues. City officials announced it would be turned into a park.

"I was very excited, I mean, come on, it was a battery factory," said Smith, who first moved to the neighborhood when she was seven.

But some residents never wanted a park there. They worried about letting their children play on ground that could have been littered with lead. They also worried the park would attract criminals.

Little by little, neighbors like Bob Myers raised concerns about possible lead and other toxic residues, and the idea of choosing that site for a park lost its luster.

Some fought against it, approaching city

officials and the City Council. But city planners said the Elmhurst Planning Committee had community development funds to spend and it wanted the park.

"I grew up in a small town in Oklahoma, I know about environmental racism, we all lived downwind and downstream of it," Myers said. "The city knew what was there — I even knew there was a problem there."

The park was more than half completed in 1977 when a bunch of Elmhurst district neighbors passed the hat, collected \$250, and hired their own consultant to test the park's soil.

What they found was alarming. Some soil samples showed 96,000 parts per million of lead — hundreds of times higher than health standards allow.

Park was excavated

By the time the park's lawns were first mowed in June 1978, part of the park was already being excavated to remove toxins. The ball field in the south end of the park dug up and dirt removed in an attempt to eliminate the lead.

Workers removed 12 inches of topsoil, moving dirt from one area to another to create grassy knolls. Critics charge this spread the contaminants around. The park was covered over and opened for business.

For awhile, the park's neighbors had more to worry about than lead. Myers, who owns property on Sunnyside, said adults started hanging out in the park, drinking and dealing drugs. Because the bathrooms weren't open at night, the tidy yards across the street became convenient urinals.

The police moved in and things quieted down. Parents sent their kids over to play in the sandbox, and toddlers spent their days learning ABCs at the Tiny Tots Day Care center.

Some worried that toxic dangers still existed at the park, but others tried not to think about it.

"I didn't worry," said Willie Pleasant, 77, who has lived on Sunnyside Street for decades. "What you don't know won't hurt you."

In 1990, though, neighbors were alarmed to see that the playground equipment in the sandbox had rotted away. They worried that toxics had eaten away at the wood supports.

The city removed the equipment and put up a fence. City officials didn't initially tell the neighbors what had happened to the equipment, though they later said the apparatus fell apart because water had collected under the sandbox.

Rotting sliding boards

In April 1990, Ted Weller, the city's safety consultant, tested the sandbox to find out what made the slides and climbing bars rot. He found enough lead to cause health problems for children playing in the sandbox. In his report, Weller wrote that his hands "tingled" in areas where he found excessive amounts of sulfates.

Weller recommended the city remove 12 to 18 inches of soil beneath the sandbox, and replace the drainage system, the dirt and the sand. But the city never followed the recommendations.

Cleve Williams, administration director of the city's Parks and Recreation Department, said he didn't know why the consultant's recommendations weren't carried out, but he suspected there were some questions about Weller's conclusions.

Williams said the real danger in the sandbox was the equipment, which the city removed.

"I knew there was trouble as soon as they took out the equipment and fenced off the sandbox," said Ike Williams, who used to live with his mother-in-law on 96th Avenue. "I told the city, if there's any danger, tell us. A sign saying 'Keep Out' means 'let's go in there' to kids."

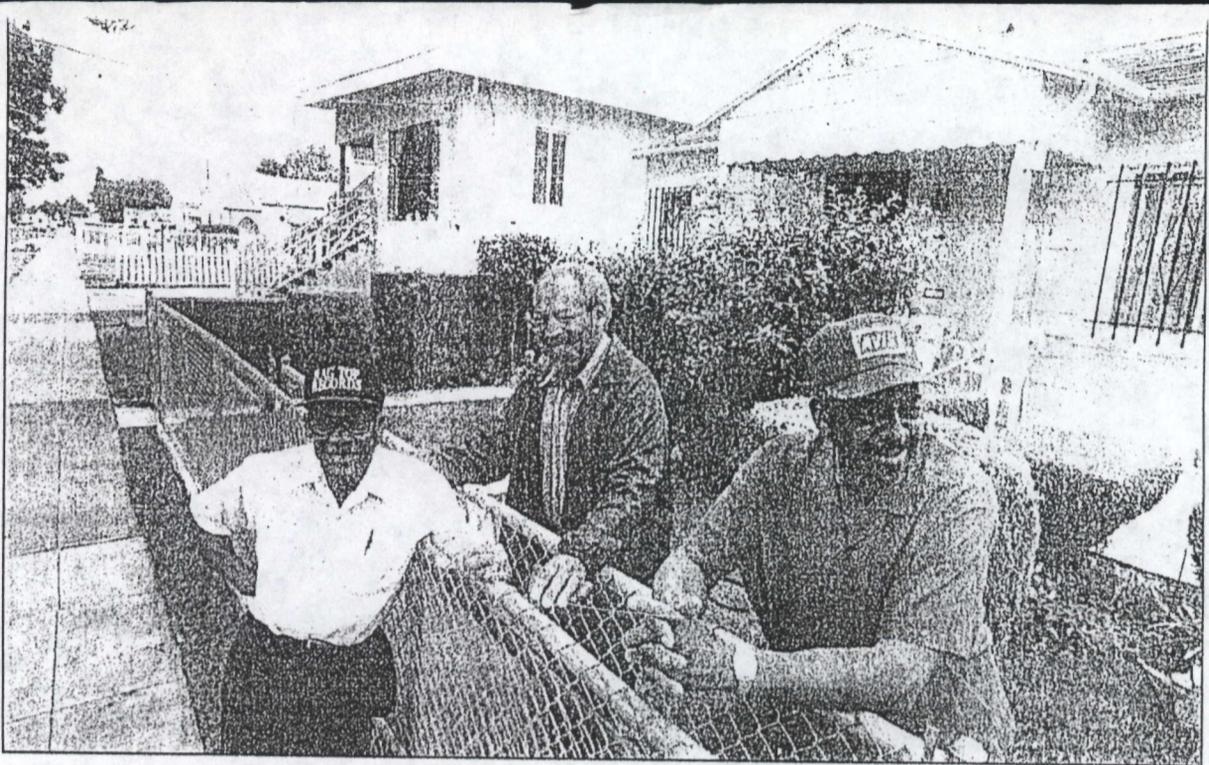
Williams said he called the health department, the city manager and the director of Public Works, all to no avail.

But Public Works Director Terry Roberts said his department never even got involved in the park issue until 1993. Before that the issue was handled by Parks and Recreation or the Office of General Services, Roberts said.

"Judging by what I found out after 1993, I'm sure people were concerned for a very long time," he said. "We pursued some testing and dealt with it as expeditiously as possible."

Ike Williams said he spent days at the hospital with his grandson, James Watkins, now 5, as the child suffered through two spinal taps to try and find out the cause of his persistent high fevers and rashes.

The level of lead in the blood of Ike Williams' granddaughter Jamikka, 4, measured 22, more than double what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta



NICK LAMMERS — Staff

Sam Murphy, Willie Pleasant and James Turrentine have been speaking out about the lead and other toxics found in and around Verdese Carter Park in their East Oakland neigh-

borhood. Below, workers at the Electric Auto-Lite Company - where Carter Park now stands —wore respirators and rubber gloves to protect themselves from poisonous lead oxide.

“... everything is going to be all right, they say. But I won't be going over there.”

Michael Carter
96th Avenue resident

has set as the level requiring medical attention.

Williams' family wasn't the only one who suffered. Mae Austin's son Brian broke out in a rash and was rushed to the hospital several times with extremely high fevers.

The doctors never pinpointed the cause, she said. But Austin suspected the culprit was toxics in the park, where Brian played all the time.

Kids kept playing

The kids continued to play in the sand, easily accessible through two openings in the chain-link fence.

When his grandchildren got sick, Ike Williams went door-to-door warning other neighbors with children, trying to get them involved. But he wasn't a scientist, and they didn't think he knew what he was talking about.

A sunny lull in an otherwise drizzly week in March 1993 lured Rafeeq Naji and Sunni Shabazz out for a little one-on-one basketball at Carter Park. Thirty minutes into the game, Naji ran into the sandbox to retrieve the ball, which had bounced over the fence. He noticed something that stopped him cold.

"I went in to get the ball and I saw this hazardous sign," Naji said. "I thought, 'This is a bad situation here.'"

That wasn't the only ominous sign the basketball players saw that day. A group of kids playing ball on the other court had noticed a dusty yellowish powder coming out of the cracks in the blacktop.

"They said, 'Well, look at this stuff coming up through the ground,'" Naji said.

The city hired Woodward-Clyde Consultants to do more testing. They found lead and arsenic. But Public Works Director Roberts said that because the lead was buried under several feet of soil, it wasn't a direct health hazard to the children who played there.

Naji, president of the African American Development Association, and Shabazz, a member of Concerned Citizens of Elmhurst, still suspected the park posed a risk. They went to the county Health Department, the EPA and even the Centers for Disease Control.

Naji said he was kicked out of City Council meetings because he demanded answers. He persisted, and the county Lead Poisoning Prevention Project tested 632 kids for lead at nearby Cox Elementary School.

In September 1993, the results were in, and nine neighborhood children were diagnosed with elevated levels of lead.

The testing team visited their homes. In all but one case, the team found evidence of lead inside the houses and soil, providing the first evidence the toxic threat had moved beyond the local park. Chemical analysis of the lead in the yards showed it came from a combination of lead paint, leaded gas exhaust, and lead from the bat-

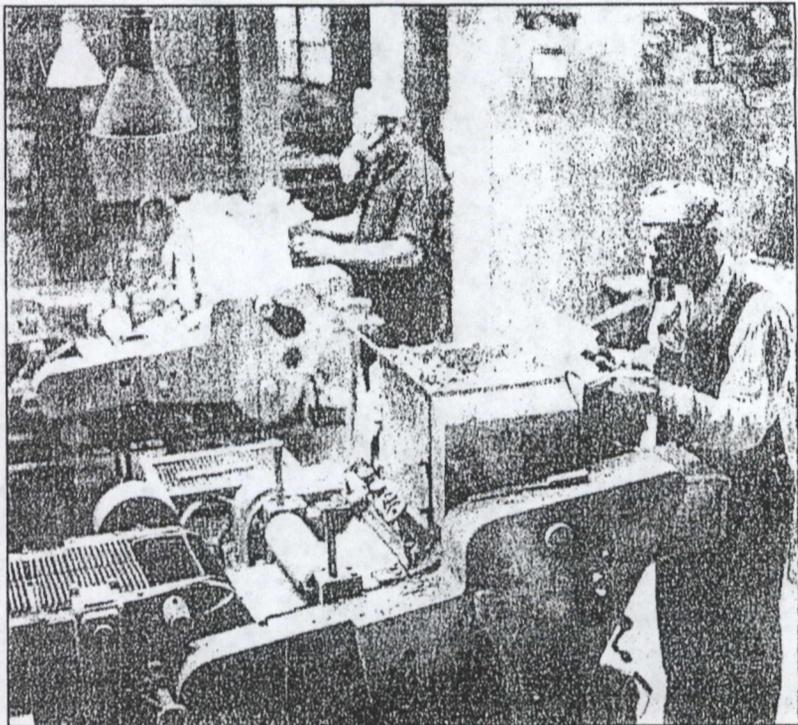


Photo courtesy of MARTIN A. FRANCIS

tery factory.

Experts say some of the lead may have come from the factory's smokestack. And flooding may have transferred lead, acids and other chemicals beyond the park to the surrounding yards.

The test results alarmed city, county and federal officials. They have held community meetings and press conferences to announce plans for wide-scale lead testing and grants to clean lead from yards.

City officials reject complaints by neighbors that they were negligent or apathetic about solving the park's problems.

Cleve Williams of the Parks and Recreation Department said it's easy to look back now and find fault with what happened, but standards were not the same in 1970 as they are now.

"When that project started, it was considered innovative," he said. "But we weren't as educated about toxics as we are now. Obviously, knowing what we know now, we should have been much more thorough, and that was not done."

Early this year, the park was completely excavated, with the exception of the day care center, where the foundation was sealed off.

The city's division of Parks and Recreation asked Elmhurst neighbors what kind of facilities they wanted put in. They asked for a pool, tennis courts and jogging path.

They got a community garden, basketball courts and a softball diamond. "If they weren't going to do what we asked, why did they bother to ask us in the first place?" said James Turrentine, a long-time Sunny-side resident. "It seems to me they still aren't doing anything right."

At least one county official worries that the mistakes of Verdese Carter Park may be repeated across the street.

Ravi Arulanthanam, an environmental scientist with the Alameda County Health

Agency, is concerned and angry that a clean up of lead at Cox Elementary School wasn't done properly.

Rather than work with his department, as Arulanthanam said they were required to do, the school district hired a contractor to come in more than a year ago and remove some dirt around the base of trees and put another layer of asphalt on top of the playground.

"They may have done it with good intentions and they may have spent a lot of money, but they didn't talk to the other agencies who were doing work right next door," he said. "They came in on the weekend, without telling anybody."

Steve Sompson, risk manager for Oakland Unified School District, said very little soil was removed from planter boxes at the school. He said it was done quickly, by the same company that removed contaminated dirt at the park.

Based on an environmental consultant's recommendations, the school district resurfaced the playgrounds after first putting down a layer of sealant.

"To the best of my knowledge right now, we're in good shape," he said. "It would appear that the district acted responsibly."

But neighbors across the street said they have seen water bubbling up from beneath the sealed blacktop.

Arulanthanam said he has asked to see the testing and clean-up reports for the school. If he isn't satisfied, he said he could make school officials dig up the playground.

"We are going to sit down and talk," he said. "If there is a risk, then we'll talk about to what extent do we need to see more testing. I will give them many options, and it's up to them to choose the options. Either to spend the money now, or spend it long term, or tell us they don't have any lead or arsenic 10 feet down."